

Ten charged in Holland and UK for deaths of 58 Chinese immigrants

Keith Lee
30 June 2000

Ten people have now been charged in connection with the deaths of 58 Chinese migrants found suffocated in the back of a container lorry last week. Just 2 of the 60 stowaways attempting to enter Britain via the port of Dover survived.

Seven men are due to appear in a Rotterdam court Friday, charged with the manslaughter of the 58. They include the owner of the Netherlands transport company whose articulated truck carried the 58 to their deaths. Last week, the Dutch driver of the lorry, Perry Wacker, was before a British court charged with facilitating illegal entry and 58 counts of manslaughter. Wacker denied any knowledge of the 60 people found in his truck. On Wednesday, Kent police charged two other men in connection with the migrants' deaths. You Yi and Ying Guo from east London have been charged with "conspiracy to facilitate illegal entry" to Britain.

Following a coroner's inquest, details have begun to emerge of the young migrants' terrible last hours on the lorry. The cause of death has officially been given as suffocation. An air vent on the side of the metal container they were hiding in was shut during the ferry crossing from Zeebrugge to Dover, cutting off their oxygen supply and causing a build-up of carbon dioxide. Trapped inside the locked container, the migrants had banged on the walls of the refrigeration unit with their shoes to try and draw attention to their plight. Coroner Richard Start said, "All 58 died with only the clothes they had on, some were dressed in only T-shirts, shorts and trainers." The migrants were not carrying any documentation, and police have only been able to establish the identity of 29.

Lawyers acting for the families of the deceased have criticised the authorities for not granting an amnesty to other Chinese immigrants here illegally, so that they can help identify the dead. One illegal immigrant

interviewed said, "We all feel great sorrow for the families of those who died. It's very difficult to get through the day thinking about it. You just think it could have been me."

The Labour government has used the deaths to justify further anti-immigration measures. Government ministers have called for even tougher penalties on truck drivers and more lorry checks. Since April this year, 200 freight drivers have been fined £2,000 each for carrying illegal immigrants in their lorries. Many of the drivers complain that they had no reason to suspect their vehicles contained stowaways, and that they are being used as unpaid immigration officials.

Stricter immigration procedures throughout Europe mean it is now virtually impossible for an asylum-seeker to enter the UK by legal means. Under Blair's government some 1,000 asylum-seekers have been jailed for travelling with false papers. A battery of laws aimed at stopping asylum-seekers forces many to use criminal gangs and traffickers in an attempt to enter Western countries, often at the cost of their lives.

Beng Chew, a London-based solicitor whose clients include Chinese asylum-seekers, has heard many accounts of such journeys. "They walk for days through mountains, sleep rough and swim across rivers before they finally reach a safe place to cross the border. It is arduous and taxing. Many do not make it; often they travel in winter. Last year I heard of one woman in her thirties who died from exhaustion." In 1999, 2,500 asylum-seekers died trying to get into Europe.

The Chinese government has for years pursued the rapid development of private industry, dismantling state enterprises and slashing social provisions, at a terrible cost to the country's workers and peasants. The result has been a sharp increase in refugees from China. It is

estimated that 100,000 people leave China every year, and they are the largest group seeking asylum in Britain. For those who make it to the UK from China, only 5 percent of asylum claims are successful.

The Dover migrants are believed to be from China's southern Fujian province, where whole communities club together to raise the large sums of money necessary to pay the smuggling gangs that arrange passage abroad. In a Fujian village theatre, red posters are put on the wall listing the names of those who have successfully made the journey to the West. They are seen as an investment, which will help ensure the future of the village. Money they send back from abroad helps the local economy. The Chinese authorities largely turn a blind eye to the trafficking in migrants, since it encourages people to fend for themselves rather than look to the state for support.

Human trafficking is big business. The International Organisation for Migration estimates that in 1996 it was worth almost as much as the international drugs trade, with annual profits of between £8 billion and £20 billion. A UK Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) memorandum estimates that gangs are charging £1,500 to smuggle a migrant from Romania to Britain, £6,000-£9,000 from India and as much as £16,000 from China. Five syndicates organise the trade from the Indian subcontinent. Criminal gangs run most of the routes out of Africa, Latin America, the Far East and Eastern Europe—regions that have experienced catastrophic declines in living standards and severe social and political instability, including civil wars.

Most of those using the smuggling gangs can only raise a deposit and are committed to paying off the rest when they find work in the West. Invariably this means that if they reach their destination, they are employed as cheap labour in restaurants and sweat shops. A BBC *Panorama* documentary screened last week revealed that thousands of illegal immigrants are working in the low-wage food processing industry, supplying the multimillion pound supermarket chains.

Wah-Piow Tan, a London lawyer interviewed by the *Independent* newspaper, said that those facing deportation, and even family members back home, often commit suicide in the face of crushing debts owed to the smuggling gangs. "There is no way back. It would take them 200 years to pay off their debts in China," he said.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact